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ABSTRACT

Within the scholarly debate about the value of visual literacy is the belief that visual literacy bestows the skill of critical viewing, or conscious appreciation of artistry along with the ability to see through manipulative uses and ideological implications of visual images. Critical thinking is commonly viewed as argument skills, cognitive processes, intellectual development, or a combination thereof. Consideration of the emotional response to the visual image is often absent from these perspectives. The structural theory of emotions considers emotions the internalized relation to the world, a kind of transaction between the individual and his environment. Those relations to people, nature, and art are transformed as emotions move individuals to action. This theory also postulates that the aesthetic experience resides in the interrelation between the mind of the viewer and the image or object being viewed; beauty is not objectively or discretely present in either one. The advertising industry uses the emotionality of the artistic tradition to exploit the consumer. In addition to objective skills of rhetoric and argumentation, therefore, critical viewers may need knowledge of persuasive communication techniques. (Contains 22 references.) (BEW)

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ED 391 490

Critical Viewing and The Significance of The Emotional Response

by Carrie Rood

This paper argues that the objective evaluation of visual images, employing critical viewing skills, as advocated by the visual literacy movement, disregards the significance of the emotional-aesthetic experience between subject-object relationships.

Critical viewing is a concept that was developed in the 1970's after the advent of the first television generation. John Debes (1986) in the forward to Richard Sinatra's book on visual literacy recalls, "the visual literacy movement sprang up because observant educators and scholars were puzzled by changes they saw in young children after television had arrived in the average American home" (1986). We are now in the age of the visual image. We are dependent upon television for global information and we are inundated by visual messages in books, magazines, and newspapers. The sheer volume and omnipresence of the visual image has caused considerable concern and speculation over recent years. Visual literacy advocates the implementation of a set of skills in order to interpret the content of these visual images, their social impact, and their ownership. Visual literacy involves three abilities: to visualize internally, to create visual images, and to read visual images (Feinstein, 1993). Within the scholarly debate about the value of visual literacy is the belief that the acquisition of visual literacy bestows the skill of critical viewing. "Learning about visual conventions...gives the viewer a foundation for heightened conscious appreciation of artistry; second, it is a prerequisite for the ability to see through the manipulative uses and ideological implications of visual images." (Messaris, 1994 p. 165)

Critical viewing draws on the traditions and mystique of what critical thinking offers. Critical thinking involves the justification of beliefs, and argumentation is the vehicle by which justification is offered (Kurfiss, 1988). Proponents of visual literacy have specifically linked four areas of study directly to the theories of visual literacy: Anthropology, Linguistics, Art, Philosophy (Hortin, 1980). Critical thinking can be traced to the Greek philosopher, Socrates. Although Socrates wrote no books, his philosophy has had a profound affect on Western philosophy through his influence on Plato and Plato's pupil Aristotle. Socrates' contribution to philosophy was his belief in objective understanding and rational argument.

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Kurfiss (1988) states that critical thinking skills are imperative for citizens of the 20th and 21st centuries because for the first time in history we have the ability to destroy all life on earth depending on the informed decisions we make. This observation leads to the question: in a world where the ratio of the visual image to text is increasing how will the justification of beliefs take place?

According to Barry Berger, critical thinking analyzes persistently and objectively any claim, source or belief to judge its accuracy, validity or worth, (Considine, 1992 p. 19). Argumentation is such an important feature of public and private life, skills for constructing and evaluating arguments are valued as educational goals. In modern times, Dewey, Glaser, Ennis and Piaget have all contributed to the implementation of contemporary critical thinking instruction. Three perspectives dominate current literature on critical thinking and its development in college: argument skills, cognitive processes, and intellectual development (Kurfiss, 1988). I have presented a brief overview here.

Argument Skills

Dressel and Mayhew (Young,1980) summarized critical thinking as a set of skills for analyzing and constructing arguments.

1. Ability to define a problem
2. Ability to select pertinent information for the solution of the problem
3. Ability to recognize stated and unstated assumptions
4. Ability to formulate and select relevant and promising hypotheses
5. Ability to draw conclusions and judge the validity of inference

These skills clarify the forms of argument and provide a framework to identify fallacious arguments.

Cognitive Processes

Cognitive psychology examines knowledge as information processing. This theoretical model of cognition has provided a framework for understanding reason, attention, perception, memory, judgment imaginative thought and speech. In the context of intellectual activity, Dewey, Langer and Arnheim have all contributed to the concept of the informative and communicative character of visual elements. The term "schema" is used illustrate the structuring and frame of reference for perceptions received from the external and internal world.

Cognitive psychologists believe a learner constructs a mental model (schema) of the situation the model is organized around, and a claim or thesis is supported by reason and evidence. Cognitive psychologists consider critical thinking as a natural part of the construction of meaning (Kurfiss, 1988).

Intellectual Development

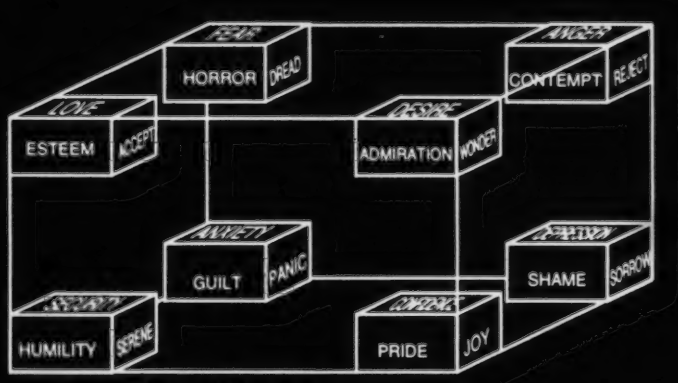
The justification of a particular belief enables the learner to assess opinions in a relativistic world. The skills of critical thinking enable the merits of a particular opinion to be discussed, but not necessarily agreed upon. Thus, intellectual development occurs as the manifestation of a con-

textual theory of knowledge through the application of critical thinking skills (Kurfiss, 1988).

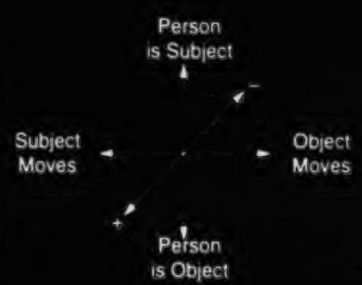
Much like critical thinking, critical viewing is not just a list of analytical skills. Indeed, critical viewing is the ability to: analyze the accuracy, validity and worth of the visual message by examining issues of content, form and style, social impact and ownership. Conspicuous by its absence in the above definition of critical viewing is a framework of analysis to explore the experienced emotional response to the visual image.

The word emotion is derived from the Latin "emovere," which means "to move out." Characteristically emotion is a word to describe the experience of being moved. We have an impulse to outward expression. Across time and culture various theories investigate the phenomena of the emotional experience from differing viewpoints. Here, the central feature of emotion (how we experience emotion, as passively moving us, while at the same time that it is part of us) is examined by De Rivera (1977) in his structural theory of emotions. De Rivera's theory is of particular relevance in describing the human emotional response to the visual image.

According to the structural theory of emotions, the emotional experience is a paradox. We are passively being moved rather than acting and yet the movement seems to be coming from within us. An emotion is no passive reaction to a stimulus, but the transaction between the individual and his environment. In the following illustrations, De Rivera (1977, p. 67)



Matrix of Emotions



diagrammatically represents the juxtaposition of subject-object inter-relationships in an emotional matrix of 24 emotions.

"When we examine individual emotions they reveal different types of movement and these different types suggest that an emotion is not an isolated entity, but rather part of a system that governs object-relations, a structure, which can only be explained if we use the dyad [the person and the other] as the unit of the analysis" (De Rivera, 1977 p.12)

The subject of an emotional movement is always the person experiencing the emotion. It-emotions are emotions focused on external objects. Me-emotions are focused on the person. "Each particular emotion is the result of choices which organize our relation to an object. Thus emotions have features in common with perception. Both consist of active behavior on the part of the individual even though neither is outwardly visible as such. In both, a certain object involves the self "moves" him to such internal activity which does not realize information perceived from the outside world as such but transforms it to be meaningful to the relation of the individual to the world" (Sava, 1981, p. 11).

The structural theory of emotions considers emotions the internalized relation to the world, to people, nature, art, etc. The emotional experience reflects the transformation of our relation to the world (De Rivera 1977). The transformations are the movement of emotions. Each type of emotion reflects a different kind of transformation. Each emotion involves its own transformation in relation to the world and is interrelated to all the other emotions.

If we are moved to action, through our emotions, the dynamic emotional reaction to the visual image, as described by De Rivera, deserves consideration. A certain emotional reaction that an object produces in an individual is characteristic of the aesthetic experience (Sava, 1981). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, aesthetic derives from the Greek word meaning "feel, apprehend by the senses." Aesthetics is a branch of philosophy that deals with whether qualities such as beauty and ugliness are objectively present in the mind of the individual or whether such qualities are objectively present in the things they appear to qualify. According to De Rivera's structural theory of emotion, aesthetic perception, experience or appreciation would not be discreetly present in the subject or the object but inter-related. Sava points out, "Aesthetic perception, experience, and appreciation are influenced both by the preceding cognitive and emotional experience of the subject and by the characteristics of the object (1981).

The aesthetic can be defined as a particular mode of apprehending and responding to experience. "The aesthetic is a mode of intelligence working not through concepts but through precepts, the structural elements of the sensory experience and that the arts are the symbolic forms for its deciphered elaboration and development (Abbs, 1989 p. 76). The arts are dependent on the aesthetic modality because they operate through it (through the senses).

Mandel states, "Art uses emotion to hold and stimulate the audience," (1967 p. 80). The advertising industry uses the emotionality of the artistic tradition to exploit the consumer. Until the 1950's the advertisement industry "mainly stressed the product's characteristics and benefits. Em-

phasis gradually shifted to gathering and applying information about purchasers,"(Kervin, 1990 p. 16). Advertisers sought out artists to support their product campaigns, in order to influence specific target audiences.

"We may be unaware of the work done by advertising creators to gain our attention and *positive response* [emphasis added], and by ourselves as we decode and interpret advertisements, "(Kervin, 1990 p. 8). Kervin in the article titled: "Advertising and Persuasion from Logical Argumentation to Seductive Ambiguity," explains that the very ubiquitousness, and economic importance (and therefore probable continuance) of advertisements suggests that we should critically evaluate advertisements. Will critical viewing assist the viewer here? Are the skills involved in critical viewing sufficient?

Earlier in this paper, is was pointed out that the main objective of critical thinking and critical viewing centers on the quality of critical reasoning, skill of analysis, and the construction of argument/visual image. Where is the school of philosophy to provide skills to interpret the influence of the visual image beyond objective analysis? "Failure...derives from an inability to differentiate the arts from other disciplines in such a way that they are established as autonomous forms of inquiry, unique disciplines of understanding with distinctive traditions." (Abbs, 1989 p. 76).

Persuasive communication can be considered a form of argumentation. Literature from the school of rhetoric suggests that arguments can vary as to how clearly a proposition is presented and as to the weight given to logical versus emotional proofs, the former objectively, the latter verifiable subjectively. Mills states that, Aristotle's three avenues of persuasion for speakers delineate persuasive techniques in arguments as: ethos, exhibitions of communications credibility, pathos, emotional appeals, and logos, support of a logical nature (Kervin, 1990 p. 17).

Argumentation can involve one, two or all three proofs. Advertisers choose one or a combination of proofs depending on the communicator, message, situation and audience. Advertisements, through their use of visual codes, create a context for their

ARGUMENTS

Logical Proofs ——— Emotional Proofs
Factual Narrative

Conventional

Emotional
(Ambiguous) *Nonconventional*

6

products. Visual codes are rules guiding choice and arrangement of elements within a message. Arguments ranging from logical to emotional proofs and codes ranging from conventional to nonconventional have been schematized diagramatically by Kervin (1990 p. 18).

Using critical viewing skills based on logical deductive reasoning to evaluate visual images fails in the arena of advertising where persuasive techniques are presented through the modality of aesthetics.

Kervin observes that ambiguous advertisements present the "argument" dependent wholly on emotion; the coding is very nonconventional. "A factual, narrative or non ambiguous emotional advertisement may be overtly accepted or rejected because it is critically assessed... At the opposite end of rational thinking are ambiguous advertisements... This type of advertising seems in particular to suppress consumer's critical thinking, appealing primarily to senses and feelings." (Kervin, 1990 p. 38).

Images are deemed successful to the degree that they move us. Characteristically, emotion is a word to describe the experience of being moved from within. This is the significance of the emotional response. The skill of critical viewing does not necessarily lead to the objective understanding of images beyond their ability to influence, because the emotionality of aesthetic subject-object relationships is not addressed.

The visual literacy movement originally advocated that visual images could be repositioned within the framework of critical reason and thought, and thereby immunity from influence would be provided. The task is misconstrued: the skills of critical viewing are insufficient. If we function by an emotional schemata and the process of critical reasoning, the tools we need to decipher our experience are to be found not only in the objective analysis of the isolated visual image but in our continued self awareness of the emotional response. Not to acknowledge the emotionality of the aesthetic visual experience misrepresents our experience, and subverts the value of critical viewing skills.

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